

IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT  
WESTERN DISTRICT OF ARKANSAS  
FORT SMITH DIVISION

BETTY J. SAUNDERS

PLAINTIFF

vs.

Civil No. 2:16-cv-02063

CAROLYN W. COLVIN

DEFENDANT

Commissioner, Social Security Administration

**REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**  
**OF THE UNITED STATES MAGISTRATE JUDGE**

Betty J. Saunders (“Plaintiff”) brings this action pursuant to § 205(g) of Title II of the Social Security Act (“The Act”), 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2010), seeking judicial review of a final decision of the Commissioner of the Social Security Administration (“SSA”) denying her application for Supplemental Security Income (“SSI”) and a period of disability under Title XVI of the Act.

Pursuant to the provisions of 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1) and (3) (2009), the Honorable P. K. Holmes, III referred this case to this Court for the purpose of making a report and recommendation. In accordance with that referral, and after reviewing the arguments in this case, this Court recommends Plaintiff’s case be **REVERSED AND REMANDED**.

**1. Background:**

Plaintiff protectively filed her SSI application on July 5, 2013. (Tr. 11). In this application, Plaintiff alleges being disabled due to back pain, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), cholesterol, leg pain, double vision, and headaches. (Tr. 11, 175). Plaintiff alleges an onset date of May 1, 2012. (Tr. 11). This application was denied initially and again upon reconsideration. (Tr. 11, 77-80).

Plaintiff requested an administrative hearing on January 14, 2014. (Tr. 93-94). Plaintiff’s

administrative hearing was held on September 4, 2014. (Tr. 25-40). At this hearing, Plaintiff was present and was represented by Davis Duty. *Id.* Plaintiff and Vocational Expert (“VE”) Monty Lumpkin testified at this hearing. *Id.* At this hearing, Plaintiff was fifty (50) years old and had an eighth grade education (Tr. 19, 176).

On December 19, 2014, the ALJ entered an unfavorable decision denying Plaintiff’s application. (Tr. 11-20). In this decision, the ALJ found Plaintiff had not engaged in substantial gainful activity since July 5, 2013. (Tr. 13, Finding 1). The ALJ next found Plaintiff had the following severe impairments: degenerative disc disease of the cervical spine, weak grip strength bilaterally, COPD, mood disorder, and personality disorder. (Tr. 13, Finding 2). Despite being severe, the ALJ determined those impairments did not meet or medically equal the requirements of any of the Listings of Impairments in Appendix 1 to Subpart P of Regulations No. 4 (“Listings”). (Tr. 13, Finding 3).

In this decision, the ALJ evaluated Plaintiff’s subjective complaints and determined her RFC. (Tr. 15-19, Finding 4). First, the ALJ evaluated Plaintiff’s subjective complaints and found her claimed limitations were not entirely credible. *Id.* Second, the ALJ determined Plaintiff retained the RFC to perform light work but was limited to frequent handling; must avoid concentrated exposure to fumes, odors, dusts, gases, poorly ventilated areas and similar environments; and is able to perform work limited to simple, routine, and repetitive tasks involving only simple, work-related decisions with few, if any, workplace changes and no more than incidental contact with co-workers, supervisors, and the general public. *Id.*

The ALJ evaluated Plaintiff’s Past Relevant Work (“PRW”). (Tr. 19, Finding 5). The ALJ found Plaintiff had no PRW. *Id.* The ALJ, however, also determined there was other work existing

in significant numbers in the national economy Plaintiff could perform. (Tr. 19, Finding 9). The ALJ based his determination upon the testimony of the VE. *Id.* Specifically, the VE testified that given all Plaintiff's vocational factors, a hypothetical individual would be able to perform the requirements of a representative occupation such as a power screwdriver operator with approximately 393 such jobs in Arkansas and 55,720 such jobs in the nation, molding casting and forming machine tender with approximately 164 such jobs in Arkansas and 18,594 such jobs in the nation, and motel maid with approximately 1,202 such jobs in Arkansas and 136,281 such jobs in the nation. *Id.* Based upon this finding, the ALJ determined Plaintiff had not been under a disability as defined by the Act from July 5, 2013 through the date of the decision. (Tr. 20, Finding 10).

Thereafter, Plaintiff requested the Appeals Council's review of the ALJ's unfavorable decision. (Tr. 5). On March 3, 2016, the Appeals Council denied this request for review. (Tr. 1-4). On March 18, 2016, Plaintiff filed the present appeal. ECF No. 1. Both Parties have filed appeal briefs. ECF Nos. 12, 14. This case is now ready for decision.

## **2. Applicable Law:**

In reviewing this case, this Court is required to determine whether the Commissioner's findings are supported by substantial evidence on the record as a whole. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 405(g) (2010); *Ramirez v. Barnhart*, 292 F.3d 576, 583 (8th Cir. 2002). Substantial evidence is less than a preponderance of the evidence, but it is enough that a reasonable mind would find it adequate to support the Commissioner's decision. *See Johnson v. Apfel*, 240 F.3d 1145, 1147 (8th Cir. 2001). As long as there is substantial evidence in the record that supports the Commissioner's decision, the Court may not reverse it simply because substantial evidence exists in the record that would have supported a contrary outcome or because the Court would have decided the case differently. *See*

*Haley v. Massanari*, 258 F.3d 742, 747 (8th Cir. 2001). If, after reviewing the record, it is possible to draw two inconsistent positions from the evidence and one of those positions represents the findings of the ALJ, the decision of the ALJ must be affirmed. *See Young v. Apfel*, 221 F.3d 1065, 1068 (8th Cir. 2000).

It is well-established that a claimant for Social Security disability benefits has the burden of proving his or her disability by establishing a physical or mental disability that lasted at least one year and that prevents him or her from engaging in any substantial gainful activity. *See Cox v. Apfel*, 160 F.3d 1203, 1206 (8th Cir. 1998); 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(1)(A), 1382c(a)(3)(A). The Act defines a “physical or mental impairment” as “an impairment that results from anatomical, physiological, or psychological abnormalities which are demonstrable by medically acceptable clinical and laboratory diagnostic techniques.” 42 U.S.C. §§ 423(d)(3), 1382(3)(c). A plaintiff must show that his or her disability, not simply his or her impairment, has lasted for at least twelve consecutive months. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 423(d)(1)(A).

To determine whether the adult claimant suffers from a disability, the Commissioner uses the familiar five-step sequential evaluation. He determines: (1) whether the claimant is presently engaged in a “substantial gainful activity”; (2) whether the claimant has a severe impairment that significantly limits the claimant’s physical or mental ability to perform basic work activities; (3) whether the claimant has an impairment that meets or equals a presumptively disabling impairment listed in the regulations (if so, the claimant is disabled without regard to age, education, and work experience); (4) whether the claimant has the Residual Functional Capacity (RFC) to perform his or her past relevant work; and (5) if the claimant cannot perform the past work, the burden shifts to the Commissioner to prove that there are other jobs in the national economy that the claimant can

perform. *See Cox*, 160 F.3d at 1206; 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520(a)-(f). The fact finder only considers the plaintiff's age, education, and work experience in light of his or her RFC if the final stage of this analysis is reached. *See* 20 C.F.R. §§ 404.1520, 416.920 (2003).

### **3. Discussion:**

In her appeal brief, Plaintiff argues the ALJ erred: (1) in the RFC determination, (2) in his determination of Plaintiff's severe impairments, (3) by failing to give credibility to her allegations of pain, and (4) in the Step 5 determination. ECF No. 12 at 7-14. Upon review of these claims, the Court agrees with Plaintiff and finds the ALJ improperly evaluated Plaintiff's subjective complaints. Accordingly, the Court will only address this argument for reversal.

In assessing the credibility of a claimant, the ALJ is required to examine and to apply the five factors from *Polaski v. Heckler*, 739 F.2d 1320 (8th Cir. 1984) or from 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929.<sup>1</sup> *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (2007). The factors to consider are as follows: (1) the claimant's daily activities; (2) the duration, frequency, and intensity of the pain; (3) the precipitating and aggravating factors; (4) the dosage, effectiveness, and side effects of medication; and (5) the functional restrictions. *See Polaski*, 739 at 1322.

The factors must be analyzed and considered in light of the claimant's subjective complaints of pain. *See id.* The ALJ is not required to methodically discuss each factor as long as the ALJ acknowledges and examines these factors prior to discounting the claimant's subjective complaints.

---

<sup>1</sup> Social Security Regulations 20 C.F.R. § 404.1529 and 20 C.F.R. § 416.929 require the analysis of two additional factors: (1) "treatment, other than medication, you receive or have received for relief of your pain or other symptoms" and (2) "any measures you use or have used to relieve your pain or symptoms (e.g., lying flat on your back, standing for 15 to 20 minutes every hour, sleeping on a board, etc.)." However, under *Polaski* and its progeny, the Eighth Circuit has not yet required the analysis of these additional factors. *See Shultz v. Astrue*, 479 F.3d 979, 983 (2007). Thus, this Court will not require the analysis of these additional factors in this case.

*See Lowe v. Apfel*, 226 F.3d 969, 971-72 (8th Cir. 2000). As long as the ALJ properly applies these five factors and gives several valid reasons for finding that the Plaintiff's subjective complaints are not entirely credible, the ALJ's credibility determination is entitled to deference. *See id.*; *Cox v. Barnhart*, 471 F.3d 902, 907 (8th Cir. 2006). The ALJ, however, cannot discount Plaintiff's subjective complaints "solely because the objective medical evidence does not fully support them [the subjective complaints]." *Polaski*, 739 F.2d at 1322.

When discounting a claimant's complaint of pain, the ALJ must make a specific credibility determination, articulating the reasons for discrediting the testimony, addressing any inconsistencies, and discussing the *Polaski* factors. *See Baker v. Apfel*, 159 F.3d 1140, 1144 (8th Cir. 1998). The inability to work without some pain or discomfort is not a sufficient reason to find a Plaintiff disabled within the strict definition of the Act. The issue is not the existence of pain, but whether the pain a Plaintiff experiences precludes the performance of substantial gainful activity. *See Thomas v. Sullivan*, 928 F.2d 255, 259 (8th Cir. 1991).

In the present action, the ALJ did not comply with the requirements of *Polaski*. Instead of complying with *Polaski* and considering the *Polaski* factors, the ALJ only focused on Plaintiff's medical records and the opinions of Plaintiff's treating and consultative physicians, along with a brief discussion of Plaintiff's activities of daily living. (Tr. 15-19). The ALJ also provided an entirely conclusory reason for discounting Plaintiff's subjective complaints:

After careful consideration of the evidence, the undersigned finds that the claimant's medically determinable impairments could reasonably be expected to cause the alleged symptoms; however, the claimant's statements concerning the intensity, persistence and limiting effects of these symptoms are not entirely credible for the reasons explained in this decision.

(Tr. 16).

Accordingly, the Court finds the ALJ's decision to discount Plaintiff's subjective complaints

without a sufficient basis was improper under *Polaski*. See *Polaski*, 739 F.2d at 1322 (holding a claimant's subjective complaints cannot be discounted "solely because the objective medical evidence does not fully support them [the subjective complaints]"). Accordingly, this case must be reversed and remanded.

**4. Conclusion:**

Based on the foregoing, the undersigned finds that the decision of the ALJ, denying benefits to Plaintiff, is not supported by substantial evidence and recommends that it be **REVERSED AND REMANDED**.

**The Parties have fourteen (14) days from receipt of this Report and Recommendation in which to file written objections pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 636(b)(1). The failure to file timely objections may result in waiver of the right to appeal questions of fact. The Parties are reminded that objections must be both timely and specific to trigger *de novo* review by the district court. See *Thompson v. Nix*, 897 F.2d 356, 357 (8th Cir. 1990).**

**ENTERED this 23rd day of December 2016.**

/s/ Barry A. Bryant  
HON. BARRY A. BRYANT  
U.S. MAGISTRATE JUDGE